

# TITLE PAGES IN ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS

ABRIDGED FROM A LECTURE BY JAN JUST WITKAM

Title pages seem so self-evident that hardly any special attention is given to them. They are just there; we turn them over, usually disregarding them, and then start reading our book. That modern title pages are often products of graphic design with an art status of their own is often not realised by the modern reader. In the printed books of today the title page primarily gives the legal status of the book, it mentions the author and title, and most importantly the publisher who has invested in the production and who wishes to make a profit from sales of the book. His and the author's rights are protected by national and international copyright laws, hence the need for clarity. However, this has not always been so. The first simple, label-like, title pages in the western book only appeared about five hundred years ago. Before that, the book started with the beginning of the text, it was as simple as that.

In the Arabic manuscript book, quite different features may be seen from a very early stage of the development of the Islamic book onward. The early title page contains, of course, the basic information, title and author. There exists an extremely old copy of the *Gharib al-Hadith* by Abu Ubayd (d.837), which is dated 866, and which has just that (MS Leiden Or. 298). It is one of the oldest occurrences of what cannot be characterised otherwise than a proper title page. We must be cautious however, because we see that the manuscript in question has not just one title page, but many of them. In fact, all quires (*kumusa*) of this manuscript have a title page of their own, and these are numbered consecutively. The serial numbering does not indicate the numbers of the volumes of the work but that of the quires. Numerous title pages were created this way in order to cater for a registration of the genealogy of the text (by *riwaya* or *sama'*, meaning written or oral transmission), by which the manuscript would establish its link to the author's copy of that text.

In addition, such title pages could be and were indeed used as a registration sheet for students who had read the text, or at least the text contained in that quire together with their teacher. So, in course of time, such copies would be filled with all sorts of notes stating the names of the students present at the reading session, stating the dates and sometimes the place or places where the book was read, and that was repeated in each and every quire. A combined analysis of such study notes or reading protocols presents us with a vivid insight in the methods of the classical Muslim scholars and their educational practices. These methods can be summarised as follows: a teacher would use an authenticated (by *riwaya* or *sama'*) copy of his textbook in reading sessions with his students, and would then note down their completion of the reading in the manuscript, as a sort of student registration. With such registration, all sorts of details were added, providing us with a lively and humane picture of the conditions of traditional education. These reader's protocols in Arabic manuscripts

(*igazat al-qira'a*) had their heyday in the 12th-14th century, but their origins are much older.

Another type of title page can be found in what can be called books of royal or princely patronage. Their occurrence coincides with the aforementioned type of scholarly and educational title page. Having an important library would enhance someone's status as a literate person and a patron of the arts and sciences. Rich and important people would make foundations from their libraries or might join them to educational institutions that they had founded. Such books were splendidly made in a number of respects, many of which one can observe at the same time. They were written on good, quite heavy and glossy papers of medium to large size, they had

excellent, or at least expert, calligraphy frequently executed with the use of gold or coloured inks, and they were contained in a well-made binding. Such volumes, which are not unlike our modern bibliophile editions, could have well drafted illuminations on their title pages.

The illustrators were people who would make, primarily, beautiful copies of the Qur'an. It is their Qur'anic work that would hone their skills by which they could develop their talents. It cannot come, therefore, as a complete surprise that the illuminations, which we see on the title pages of Arabic manuscripts other than the Qur'an would show features similar in shape to those in Qur'anic manuscripts. However, it is evident that the function of such ornamental elements in non-Qur'anic manuscripts is different. Whereas in Qur'ans the illuminated strips were used to differentiate the text of the sura headings from the holy text, no such functions was needed for illuminations on

a title-page of a non-Qur'anic manuscript. Yet, the illustrators have in many cases, used precisely such ornamental elements on the title page. One can observe this especially in the beginning of the development of ornamenting the title page.

Again, it is difficult to define an exact period for the ornamentation of the title pages. A beautifully executed set of leaves containing the elements of the title page is



Ex-libris of al-Malik al-Muzaffar, the Ayyubid Sultan of Hama (Syria), who reigned from 1228 to 1245, on the illuminated title page of a copy of *al-Qasida al-Maqsuma* by Ibn Durayd (MS Leiden Or. 121)





Title page of *Fawaid al-Hadith* by Ibn Junayd al-Razi (d. 1023). The MS is dated 1198. There are several *riwayat* and *qama'at* and also *qira'a* notes. The notes tell a tale of intensive use of the manuscript in an educational environment (MS Leiden Or. 580).

known from a manuscript which was made in Ghazna, in present day Afghanistan (MS Leiden Or. 437), which can be dated at approximately between 1049 and 1052, when it was commissioned by the Ghaznawid Abu Mansur Abd al-Rashid. In a detailed study, S. M. Stern has described the text and outward appearance of this MS (in R. Pinder-Wilson (ed.), *Paintings from Islamic Lands*, Oxford 1969 pp. 7-31). That MS, Khulqih, could be considered as one of the earliest examples of such an illuminated title page. As often, the picture in this MS is not as clear-cut as one would like it to be. A later owner, probably living in the thirteenth century in Hama in Syria, where the MS in the meantime had gone, has drastically changed the first page of the MS, and superimposed his own name on the ex-libris from Ghazna and has covered what he could not use of it with scrolls in red and gold ink. The bibliographical part of the title in this book is spread over the following two pages of the manuscript, giving it an opening that is reminiscent of an illuminated double opening page in a Qur'anic manuscript. It shows that the Qur'anic illumination can never have been far from the mind of those artists who also became engaged in illuminating non-Qur'anic manuscripts. Seen from the other end, it implies that Qur'anic illumination cannot be studied in isolation from the illuminations that we find in non-Qur'anic manuscripts. It should be added, that although the subject matter of the manuscript from Ghazna is Qur'anic, it could hardly be styled as a secular text. The text treats the characteristics of the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, a subject that had become, by that time, only second to the Qur'an itself in holiness.

Though this manuscript from Ghazna shows a very

clear example of the illuminated title page, it is mostly because of the sheer lack of manuscripts, let alone illuminated ones, that have survived from the 10th and 11th centuries that we are unable to make remarks of a wider relevance on trends in illumination in this earlier period. Only in the Ayyubid period, and in the ensuing Mamluk era, do we see development in the art of the illuminated title page, a feature that we can observe up to the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It should be noted that developments in manuscript design and ornamentation in the western part of the Islamic world are here left out of the discussion. The Maghrebi and Andalusian development in the art of the book should be treated from a different angle and perspective.

The elements of the illuminated title page would often be threefold. First there would be the indication of the title of the work, which in traditional Arabic bibliography has always been the most important element of a book plate. This is different from the primacy of the author's name, which in modern times has become the first element in bibliographical description. Secondly, there would be an indication of the author of the text. And finally, there would be an ornamented space for a royal or princely ex-libris. These three elements are not necessarily present on all illuminated title pages. It may happen that a luxuriously produced manuscript (on which one would assume to find an ornamented title page) has no conspicuous ex-libris. The reasons for its absence could be manifold. Maybe the person who commissioned it never collected the manuscript, or maybe there was another reason, such as dissatisfaction of the patron with about the quality of the work. Sometimes ornamented title pages would only contain the first two elements of title and author. Any prominent owner who later, and in some cases many years later, acquired the fin-

Illustrated title page with an ex-libris of a Mamluk owner of a copy of the *Diwan* of the Jahiliyya poet al-Hadira, probably dating from the end of the 14th or the beginning of the 15th century (MS Leiden Or. 115).





ished manuscript would have to content himself by adding his name, or that of his library or foundation in a modest way to the title page, lest he should spoil the artistic qualities of that page. It might also happen that a commercial illuminator might leave a space in the illuminated title page, to be completed later, after the conclusion of the sale of the manuscript.

An example for this is the four-volume copy of al-Gawhari's *Sahah* (MS Leiden Or. 85). It's four uniformly executed title pages first give a title on an ornamented strip, with a marginal flourish as is familiar from Qur'anic manuscripts. The text of the title is given in an archaic (the volumes date from 1341 to 1347!) Kufic script. Then there is the indication of the author's name, written on a kidney shaped label, itself an uncommon shape. Finally, on the lower half of the page, there is a large empty frame, which was large enough to contain the names and honours of an important person or a lofty institution. The latter was never filled in, and we can only speculate why it was left blank.

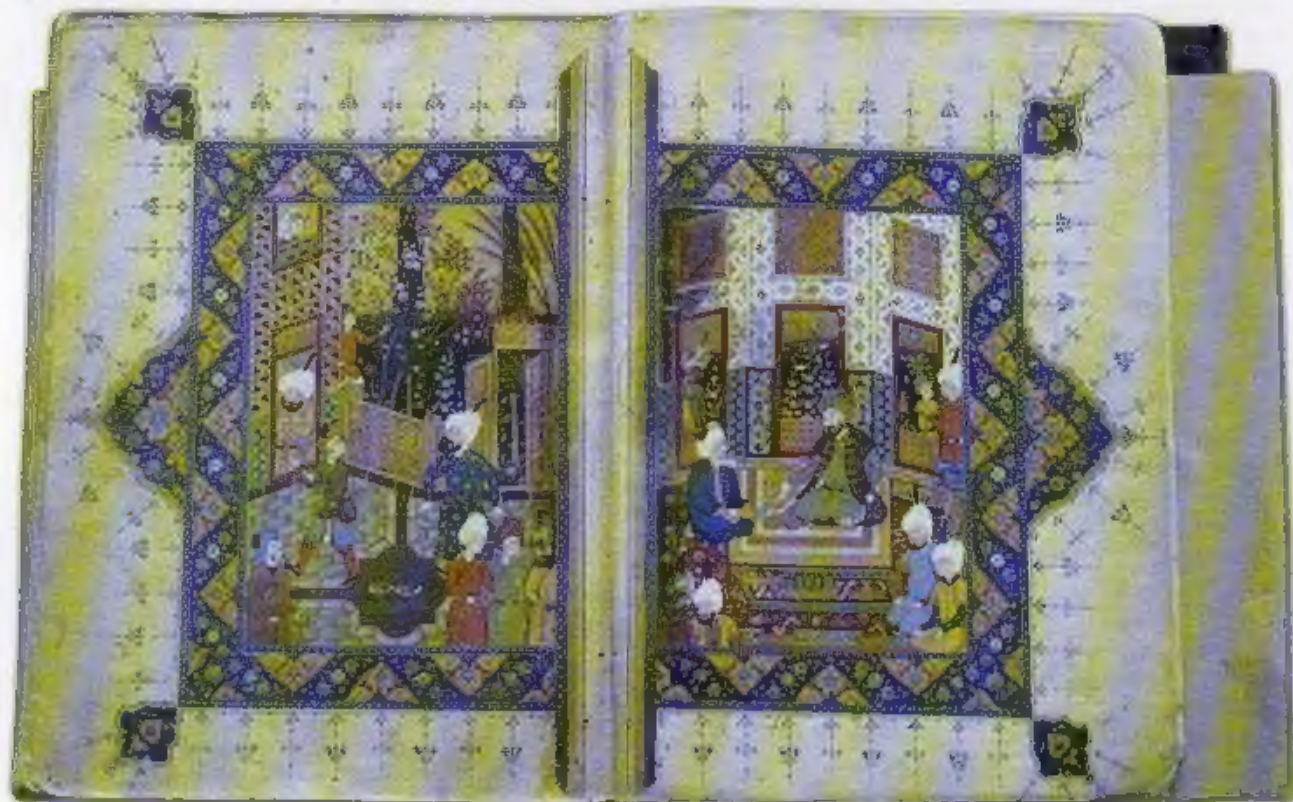
In the context of the illuminated title page, something should be said, but in a very succinct way, about the dedicatory illustrated double pages which one sometimes sees in luxury manuscripts, preceding the text, and seemingly substituting elements of the title page. There are few very old examples of this in Arabic manuscripts, for example, the Topkapı manuscript of Dioscorides' *"De materia medica"* (Arabic title *"Kitab al Hasha'ish fi Hayuda al 'Ilaj"*). In it, we see the dignified author sitting on a chair, with pupils presenting him a book, probably their copy of his work. This way of presenting the author is, evidently, of classical origin, dating from before the

advent of Islam. Yet, such pages have survived, in an Islamic garb, in many, almost exclusively Persian manuscripts.

A very late example of this is the scene in which the Persian poet Hakim I Sana'i offers his book to the king of Ghazna (MS Leiden Or. 1651). On the miniature, we see Bahram Shah, the Sultan of Ghazna and the author of the book, Hakim I Sana'i. The miniature has far reaching implications. It shows the Sufi, Hakim, offering poetry in praise of a ruler something that would appear to be a contradiction. Courting worldly power is indeed a conflicting issue in the Sufi's life and work. If we limit ourselves to the present miniature, we see the poet humbly (or not too humbly) offering what seems to be his book, the *"Hadiqat al Haqiqat"*, to the Sultan. The artist of the miniature, however, has depicted an opened notebook (*safina*), so it may be possible that the poet offers here one of his poems in praise of the Sultan. Maybe we should not attach too much importance to that incongruity. A double page opens the volume; there is no separate title page in the book. The title and author are first mentioned on the next page, with a calligraphic text inside an ornamented panel.

There is, here, a difference with seemingly similar scenes shown in manuscripts. In the miniature with Hakim I Sana'i, the illustration reflects an episode of the life of the author, and summarizes a moral conflict. Should he search for worldly power or should his goal be spiritual wisdom and union with the Creator? The miniature shows the author and his book in a courtly context, in the environment of power. It relates to the contents of the book. With some temerity, one might say

*The poet Hakim Sana'i (d.1180) offering a copy of his hadiqa to Bahram Shah, the Sultan of Ghazna. Double page overture to a Safavid copy of the Hadiqa, dated 1579. The image expresses the moral dilemma of the poet, who wavers between courting worldly power and renouncing the world (MS Leiden Or. 1651).*





that the miniature has come in the place of title and author of the book, an image instead of text, but an image with a reference to the text and identity of the author.

Similar images can also reflect to the manuscript's ownership. This can be seen in a Shirazi style manuscript of Firdawsi's *Shahnameh* (MS Leiden Or. 494). The dedicatory double page in that manuscript dates from 840AH, 1437AD. We are now unable to identify this court and its prince, but for the fifteenth century owner of the MS this may have been less of a mystery. It is certainly not a scene from the *Shahnameh*. It can, therefore, hardly be anything else than a portrayal of the proud owner, the focal point of reverence. One might put a double page such as this one, on equal footing with a royal ex-libris. Here the message is not given in elaborate calligraphy in an ornamental panel, but by means of a colourful image.

In the purely graphic title page, we have seen that this feature is used in a period of more than one thousand years. It displayed a number of components. The mention of title and author (always in that order) is of all ages – without these elements there is no title page. Other components have also been incorporated such as marks of ownership and readership, these seem, of course, to be of all ages as well. They are hardly ever contemporary to the MS, but they often reveal interesting details on readership, and on how people treat their books. Another feature, that has more to do with the contents of the book, is the complex of information on textual transmission (*riwayat*) and on readership in an educational environment.

In the ornamental title pages, we meet most of the above features, but there are other elements. First, there is the element of luxury and royal patronage.

This lecture has suggested a link between the illumination in *Masahif* and the way in which the title page in manuscripts are illuminated. It had pointed out stylistic similarities. Many elements of the Qur'anic ornamentation, especially the strips containing the sura headings, can be found back as elements in ornamented title pages in non-Qur'anic manuscripts. Martin Lings, in his work, *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (London 1976), has first shown us a number of these elements, but he did so almost exclusively in a Qur'anic context, and he has almost always refrained from describing the nature of these ornamental elements. The author has also shown that the Qur'anic ornamental elements are commonly used in non-Qur'anic books as well.

The lecture has also shown that ornamented title pages occur in a relatively shorter period. The oldest one, in the manuscript from Ghanza, dates from about 1050, the latest one shown from about five hundred years later. These limits may be stretched on both sides of the time scale if one works with a larger sample of manuscripts than done by the author. A prominent part of the ornamented title page is the royal ex-libris. The lecturer has drawn attention to a few of these. Some of those mentioned are related, or come from the same source. The lack of a handbook on such ex-libris texts is sad, and as long as such a handbook does not exist, it is extremely

complicated to identify the owners or institutions in whose libraries these manuscripts were once proudly incorporated.

Finally, the author has drawn attention at what he would like to call the 'luxury complex'. Many of the manuscripts under review were well written, made of a good quality of paper, provided with ornaments both in the title pages and the texts, occasionally adorned with miniatures as well, and often kept in beautiful bindings or cases. The author's purpose in mentioning this accumulation of beautifying elements is to propagate a holistic approach in the study of the beautiful book. One should not study ornaments, or illustrations for that matter, as separate from the texts. The author further stresses the importance of looking at such luxury books as fully accomplished objects, and to devote attention to all components by which they are distinguished as luxury objects. That, at least, must have been how their former owners have looked at them. A practical consequence of this is that historians of the art of the Islamic book should improve their command of the languages of the texts in these, and other books, and increase their knowledge about booklore. For philologists like the author, it means that they should increase our awareness of the artistic elements in a book that are expressed by a combined language of images, ornaments, bindings and script.

*Illuminated title page with ex-libris, probably of Mu'in al-Din Sulayman, the first ruler of the Perwane dynasty, which ruled in Sinople, Smasun and Janiq in the second half of the 13th century. The manuscript contains Mukhtar al Hikam wa Mahasin al Kallim by Mubashir B. Fatik and is dated 1262 (MS Leiden Or. 515)*

